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ABSTRACT

A study examined the gender and status (defined as traditional versus nontraditional student) differences on the Classroom Interaction Rules Survey (CIRS). The research questions asked if significant differences exist between males and females and traditional and nontraditional students in terms of compliance with and importance of implicit nonverbal rules in the college classroom. It is suggested that the classroom is a place where students are socialized into behaving in certain ways. Results suggest that gender is a greater influence than status in the socialization of implicit nonverbal rules. The role expectations may be greater in terms of gender than of status given the results of the CIRS. (Contains seven references.) (Author/CR)

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Running head: NONVERBAL RULES IN THE CLASSROOM

Implicit Nonverbal Rules in the Classroom:

A Study of Gender and Status Differences

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Abstract

This study examines the gender and status (defined as traditional vs. nontraditional student) differences on the Classroom Interaction Rules Survey (CIRS)[1]. The research questions ask if significant differences exist between males and females and traditional and nontraditional students in terms of compliance with and importance of implicit nonverbal rules in the college classroom. It is suggested that the classroom is a place where students are socialized into behaving in certain ways. The results of this study suggest that gender is a greater influence than status in the socialization of implicit nonverbal rules. The role expectations may be greater in terms of gender than of status given the results of the CIRS.

Implicit Nonverbal Rules in the Classroom:

A Study of Gender and Status Differences

Everybody lives by rules. There are cultural, societal, familial, and relational rules that guide everyday interactions. Humans strive to predict behavior based on their previous experience. People are socialized to know what rules to follow and when rules have been violated. Socialization is a process by which people learn what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a given cultural or social context. Theories developed to explain this phenomenon include social learning theory and cognitive development theory (Grusec & Lytton, 1988) both of which assume that the socialization process involves interaction between people and their environment. That is, socialization is not a passive process. Humans interact with their environment and are rewarded or punished for appropriate or inappropriate rule usage.

Shimanoff (1980) suggests rules are prescriptions which guide behaviors that are obligated, preferred, or prohibited in particular contexts. Rules can be explicit or implicit. Implicit rules are guides that are not formally stated but define behavior as appropriate or not based on actions that are either performed or not. An implicit rule in a family might be that family problems are not discussed outside the house. Explicit rules are formally stated regulations or customs that define appropriate or inappropriate behaviors for the group. Required hall passes in school would be an example of an explicit rule.

Rules are also essential in communicative interaction. Communication requires that we follow rules to appropriately interact. Shimanoff (1980) suggests that rules guide how symbols are used in interaction and that if rules did not exist, communication would be chaos. Communication rules are learned through interaction and socialization. Many communication

rules are implicit, in particular, nonverbal rules. An example is the rule for eye contact. Eye contact can communicate intimacy. When strangers make eye contact, that contact typically lasts for a few moments and then is followed with a downward glance. When a stranger maintains eye contact for longer periods of time, it can be uncomfortable for an individual. Society has rules against staring because it is perceived as a violation of personal space. When such a violation occurs, sanctions toward the violator are used to control the behavior. Sanctions against staring could include a returned stare or a nonverbal expression of disdain.

Rules are also explicitly and implicitly used in the classroom. Teachers and students are expected to behavior and interact in a particular way. Students are socialized to behavior appropriately, hence, the classroom becomes a situation where socialization occurs. In particular, nonverbal behaviors are taught and reinforced in the classroom. Andersen, Andersen, Murphy, & Wendt-Wasco (1985) indicate that teachers can code nonverbal behaviors of students, students follow expected nonverbal behaviors, and development of nonverbal communication skills through grade 12 suggests a socialization pattern. As part of the socialization process, students learn rules for proper behavior in the classroom. These rules can be restrictive (prohibit behavior) or prescriptive (promote behavior).

LeBlanc (1992) studied implicit nonverbal rule usage in high school and junior college classrooms. His research was concerned with at-risk students and their perception of implicit nonverbal rules. Given the research indicating how elementary, junior high, and high school students are socialized to nonverbally interact, it would follow that the socialization process continues in the college classroom. In the college classroom, however, students from high school may be in class with nontraditional students. Nontraditional students are typically labeled as such

when they are 25 years old or older (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992). This situation presents the instructor with an interesting situation and raises an interesting question: will traditional and nontraditional students comply with or view the importance of implicit nonverbals rules in the same way?

Nontraditional students have been shown to have different degrees of comfort in the classroom, different orientations toward the professor, and different perceptions of the college classroom than traditional students (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992). In particular, scholars have noted differences in learning styles between children and adults (Arnold & McClure, 1989; Laird, 1985). Adult learning is characterized by experiential learning. Adults/nontraditional students want to relate what they learn to their own experience (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Laird, 1985). Many adults return to college after age 25 to begin or finish a degree. In this situation, adults have had a break in school and, by extension, a break from the socialization process. The primary purpose of this study is to determine if there are differences between nontraditional and traditional students in terms of implicit nonverbal rules. Gender differences will also be examined.

Method

Subjects

Data were collected from students at a large southeastern university, a large midwestern university, and a small, southern private vocational school (N=366). The students were asked to fill out the survey instrument by their instructor. At the large, state universities the students were enrolled in basic communication courses. At the private vocational school, all the students who

showed up for morning, afternoon, and evening classes on one particular day were given the instrument.

Instruments and Variables

The instrument utilized in this study was the Classroom Interaction Rules Survey (CIRS) which was developed and used by LeBlanc (1992). The instrument asked the students questions about implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom. The test instrument included a statement of a rule followed by two scale items. The first scale item measured the perceptions of students regarding compliance to the stated rule. The compliance scale ranged from (1) never follow the rule, to (7) always follow the rule. The second scale item measured the perceptions of students in terms of the relative importance of the stated rule. The importance scale ranged from (1) not at all important, to (7) extremely important. In a pilot study, LeBlanc found that rules generated by students could be grouped into three categories: laziness, distraction, and respectfulness. All variables in each category were examined for this study. It is hypothesized that traditional and nontraditional students may differ in terms of the implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom. It is also hypothesized that genders may differ and that status and gender may interact.

Forty dependent variables were analyzed. These forty variables represented twenty rules which were divided into the two scales: (a) compliance with the rule, and (b) importance of the rule. Table 1 lists the rules for classroom interaction applied in the CIRS.

The two independent variables were gender and status (traditional or nontraditional). Age 25 was used as the cutoff in classifying status (24 and below = traditional, 25 and up = nontraditional).

TABLE 1

Rules applied on the CIRS

Rule 1: Students should maintain eye contact with the teacher to show they are paying attention.

Rule 2: Students should not sleep in class.

Rule 3: Students should not cheat.

Rule 4: Students should not get up and leave in the middle of class.

Rule 5: Students should not use vulgar language.

Rule 6: Students should do their own work, or homework.

Rule 7: Students should clean up after themselves.

Rule 8: Students should not make noise in class.

Rule 9: Students should not throw things.

Rule 10: Students should not publicly display affection, including hand holding.

Rule 11: Students should not pass notes to other students during class.

Rule 12: Students should not be late for class.

Rule 13: Students should sit up straight in their desk.

Rule 14: Students should raise their hand when they want to speak and then wait until they are called on.

Rule 15: Students should maintain a respectful and appropriate distance when speaking to a teacher.

Rule 16: Students should not bring up topics of discussion which are unrelated to the subject matter of the class.

Rule 17: Students should not eat or drink in class.

Rule 18: Students should not talk when the teacher is talking.

Rule 19: Students should not come to class intoxicated or high.

Rule 20: Students should not sit at the teacher's desk.

Procedure

Graduate teaching assistants of the basic communication course at the large, state universities were solicited to administer the instrument to their respective sections. The

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instructors at the small vocational school were solicited to administer the instrument to their respective classes.

Research Questions

RQ1. Do nontraditional students significantly differ from traditional students in complying with the implicit nonverbal rules (the dependent variables) in the classroom?

RQ2. Do nontraditional students significantly differ from traditional students in rating the importance of the implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom?

RQ3. Do females significantly differ from males in complying with the implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom?

RQ4. Do females significantly differ from males in rating the importance of the implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom?

RQ5. Is there an interaction between gender and status (traditional vs. nontraditional) in complying with the implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom?

RQ6. Is there an interaction between gender and status in rating the importance of implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom?

Data Analysis

A 2 (gender) by 2 (status) factorial design was used to test the independent and dependent variables. Females were coded one; males were coded two. Traditional students were coded one; nontraditional students were coded two. Two-way ANOVAs were run on all of the variables based on the following full model: Y = A + B1 gender + B2 status + B3 gender/status interaction + E, where Y = the dependent variables (1 through 40). The level of significance for this study was .05.

Results

RQ 1: The full model on all of the odd numbered variables concerning compliance with the rule was significant, $p < .05$ with 3, 362 df. Only five of the variables were significant as main effects in comparing traditional to nontraditional students, $p < .05$. Compliance with the rules concerning cheating ($F = 5.38$), vulgar language ($F = 14.05$), doing own work ($F = 4.88$), eating or drinking in class ($F = 6.64$), and talking when teacher is talking ($F = 7.79$) with df of 1, 362 were the significant variables.

RQ 2: The full model on all of the even numbered variables concerning importance of the rule was significant, $p < .05$ with 3, 362 df. Six of the variables were significant as main effects comparing traditional to nontraditional students, $p < .05$. The importance of the rules concerning not leaving class ($F = 4.60$), not using vulgar language ($F = 12.45$), not displaying affection publicly ($F = 4.90$), sitting up straight ($F = 8.84$), not eating or drinking in class ($F = 13.25$), and not talking when teacher is talking ($F = 5.98$) with 1, 362 df were the significant variables.

RQ 3: Fourteen variables were significant as main effects concerning gender with $p < .05$ at 1, 362 df. Maintaining eye contact ($F = 24.92$), sleeping in class ($F = 12.07$), cheating ($F = 5.13$), leaving class ($F = 11.77$), vulgar language ($F = 18.72$), doing own work ($F = 14.16$), making noise ($F = 7.71$), throwing things ($F = 8.42$), raising hand to speak ($F = 16.45$), respectful distance ($F = 15.44$), eating or drinking in class ($F = 24.90$), talking when teacher is talking ($F = 11.57$), intoxication ($F = 14.54$), and sitting a teacher's desk ($F = 16.38$) were the significant variables.

RQ 4: Thirteen variables concerning gender and the importance of the rules were significant as main effects, $p < .05$ with df 1, 362. The importance of eye contact ($F = 31.80$), not

cheating (F =11.56), not leaving class (F = 15.51), not using vulgar language (F = 20.07), not throwing things (F = 9.82), not displaying affection publicly (F = 28.33), sitting up straight (F = 14.51), raising hand to speak (F = 16.56), maintaining respectful distance (F = 18.80), inappropriate topics (F = 9.92), not eating or drinking in class (F = 20.12), not talking when teacher is talking (F = 12.02), and not being intoxicated or high (F = 16.93) were the significant variables.

RQ 5: Six variables were significant in terms of the interaction between gender and status and complying with rules. Cleanliness (F = 5.33), public display of affection (F = 7.96), passing notes in class (F = 10.06), tardiness (F = 4.29), sitting up straight (F = 7.11) and inappropriate topics (F = 4.70) were significant interactions, $p < .05$, df 1, 362.

RQ 6: Seven variables proved significant as interactions between gender and status concerning importance of the rules, $p < .05$, df 1, 362. The importance of being awake (F = 7.82), doing own work (F = 4.80), cleanliness (F = 8.47), being quiet (F = 6.68), not passing notes in class (F = 9.62), being on time to class (F = 4.68), and not sitting at teacher's desk (F = 4.45) were significant interactions.

Discussion

This study examined implicit nonverbal rules utilized in a classroom. Nontraditional students were compared with traditional students in terms of compliance with and importance of implicit nonverbal rules as responded to on the CIRS. Gender differences were also examined. The results of this study indicated that there were significantly more differences between males and females than between traditional and nontraditional students in terms of compliance with and importance of implicit nonverbal rules. Only five variables concerning compliance and six

concerning importance were statistically significant in terms of traditional versus nontraditional students. Fourteen variables concerning compliance and thirteen concerning importance, however, were statistically significant in terms of male versus female. There were six significant interactions between traditional/ nontraditional and gender concerning compliance, and seven concerning importance.

The results show that there may not be a large difference between traditional and nontraditional students in their continued socialization process. The expectations in terms of compliance with and importance of implicit nonverbal rules in the classroom may be very similar between traditional and nontraditional students. Gender, however, proved to be a better indicator of differences concerning compliance with and importance of implicit nonverbal rules. This may be true as a result of the gender socialization process. Male and female students may see themselves in different role or have different expectations of what should or should not occur in a classroom and as result would respond differently in rating the compliance with and importance of implicit nonverbal rules, as this study shows. As far as nontraditional students, the literature suggests they do differ in many ways from traditional students, but only on a few rules as this study shows. There were very few interactions between gender and status which suggests that other combinations of variables may better predict outcomes to the survey.

We will all continue to be socialized and the classroom will continue to be a place were socialization occurs. This study shows gender differences are more apparent than status (traditional vs. nontraditional) in terms of the implicit nonverbal socialization process. More research must be done to contribute to reliability and validity of the survey instrument as well as to find out the extent to which the college classroom is a socializing influence.

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Footnote

[1] Development of the CIRS is documented in LeBlanc (1992). A combination of educator interviews, student questionnaires, and a pilot study was utilized to generate the rules and test the CIRS.